

A 'Mr. Mom' who became a murderer

By Vince Guerrieri

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Sunday, October 13, 2002

Greg Modery liked to get together with his family every Sunday. The last time he joined them was Dec. 5, 1999.

On the following Sunday, he drove Ohio physician's assistant Ira Swearingen to a wooded area in Greene County. There Alex Martos shot Swearingen to death. The next morning, Modery put his daughter on the bus to school.

By the end of the week, Modery, then 29, had been arrested in the case. Late Friday, a Washington County jury sentenced him to life without parole on a first-degree murder conviction handed down two days earlier.

Modery and Martos robbed and beat Swearingen prior to the killing.

There is a stark contrast between Modery's middle-class life as a doting father, as described by defense attorney Fred Rabner, and the prosecution's depiction of him as a schemer.

"The man I know is not who you say he is," his wife, Christine Modery, a pharmacist at Children's Hospital in Oakland, told Washington County District Attorney John Pettit during the sentencing hearing Friday.

Witnesses testified during the trial that Modery and Martos, 35, of Bentleyville, robbed and beat various people outside of an adult bookstore off Interstate 70.

But his family testified that on Sundays, depending on his wife's schedule, Modery would sit down for brunch or dinner with her, their daughter, now 11, and his mother-in-law, Alberta Novak.

Modery, who had no prior criminal record, met the young woman who became his wife while they were both in Ringgold High School. He tried to talk to her, she said, but she didn't pay much attention to him. He finally caught her attention by jamming a pen into her locker so she couldn't open the door.

"I guess I'm just a tough nut to crack," Christine Modery said in court Friday. She declined comment beyond her testimony.

They started dating, and she went away to the University of Pittsburgh to study pharmacy. She came home to work, but also to see Modery. In 1991, within five months, Modery's mother died, he married Christine and she gave birth to their daughter.

Modery, who had no education beyond high school, agreed to stay home and

care for his daughter while his wife worked.

"He is Mr. Mom," Brian Bodner testified Friday.

Bodner now lives in a mobile home he bought from Modery when the Moderys moved to Peters to get their daughter into a good school, Bodner testified. Bodner and Modery played guitars and fixed cars together.

Modery often could be found at Klemment's Garage in Finleyville, working on cars or just hanging out. Sean "Chief" Woloski and Debrah Levandosky, both charged in the Swearingen case, also hung out at the garage.

While in the Allegheny County Jail, Modery called the garage and told Woloski and Levandosky to "get clean." The pair said they then disposed of items purchased with Swearingen's credit cards.

Levandovsky, who Modery claimed was the family baby-sitter, was described by Pettit and prosecution witnesses as Modery's girlfriend. Levandosky's brother Steve and daughter Jessie testified Friday about having gone on fishing trips with Modery and his daughter, who had a Snoopy fishing pole.

Steve Levandosky said he'd argued with his sister shortly after being questioned by police in December 1999. But he said they argued over familial matters, not a relationship she might have had with Modery.

Steve Levandosky doesn't believe Modery cheated on his wife with Debrah Levandosky. And he doesn't believe Modery is a murderer, despite the verdict. He said he left his daughter with Modery.

"In the bottom of my heart, I don't believe he could do something like that," he said. "I trusted him that much."

Vince Guerrieri can be reached at or .